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WAR ON CANCER

by Senator Beverly S. Hammerstrom

Since President Richard Nixon signed the National Cancer Act in 1971 and declared a "War on Cancer," we have made significant progress in reducing the number of deaths due to cervical cancer in this country. Yet, with 12,200 new cases in the United States each year, we still haven't won the war. Now, however, thanks to advances in diagnostic technology, we have the first real opportunity to eliminate one major malignancy. We must seize the opportunity for victory.

Cervical cancer rates have decreased significantly over the last 60 years, due to widespread screening, and yet an estimated 4,100 women die in our country each year from this common malignancy.

Cervical cancer disproportionately affects minority women and those with lower incomes because they are less likely to have access to routine screening. Hispanic women, for example, are twice as likely to be diagnosed with cervical cancer as Caucasian women. Approximately half of all cervical cancer cases are in women who have never been screened, and 10 percent are in women who haven't been screened in the last five years. Thus, despite the high level of preventative care offered in this country, we must do more to extend life-saving technology to all age-appropriate women.

In women who are screened periodically, studies show that the Pap smear's ability to identify women with cervical cancer or its early signs ranges between 51 and 85 percent. Now, however, a test exists that can detect the presence of the virus that actually causes cervical cancer with a high degree of accuracy.

Scientists now know that high-risk types of this virus, known as human papillomavirus or HPV, cause almost all cases of cervical cancer. A new DNA test for high-risk HPV has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for women 30 and older, and when used along with the traditional Pap smear, it is recognized as the screening guideline of several leading medical groups. By offering the HPV test along with the Pap to all women 30 and older, we can better identify women most likely to develop the abnormal cell changes that lead to cervical cancer and thus, through early intervention, stop this deadly disease in its tracks.

But advanced technology is only the first step in eliminating cervical cancer. To seize the opportunity, we must ensure that women are educated about HPV and cervical cancer and that they have access to screening and to the best tests available, regardless of their socioeconomic status. We must make insurance companies aware of the cost-effectiveness of this advanced screening for cervical cancer. And finally, we must educate the medical community and encourage them to move away from traditional testing and utilize the DNA with PAP test.

Unfortunately, these last two groups - insurance providers and the medical community - may be the hardest to convince of the benefits of this advanced screening. Change is always difficult in the realm of health care when it comes to reimbursement procedures. We are still reimbursing physicians based upon a 1960's health care model, rather than "rewarding" for preventative measures. One of the benefits of this new test is that it may reduce the need for cervical screening in many women from every year to once every three years - obviously a benefit for women, but a potential loss of income for physicians. Insurance payers, however, should see this as an opportunity to allocate resources more effectively.

For women who want to learn more about HPV and cervical cancer, in addition to asking their healthcare provider about this disease, women may visit www.ashastd.org/hpvccrc/index.html or contact the National HPV and Cervical Cancer Prevention Resource Center's hotline at 919-361-4848.

As a member of a Task Force on Cervical Cancer launched by Women in Government, a professional association of women legislators, I am excited to join in the next step on our agenda - a national campaign known as the Challenge to Eliminate Cervical Cancer. The goal of this campaign is to help reduce the number of women who die each year from this highly preventable disease.

By seizing the opportunity to eliminate cervical cancer, we are not just helping women and families affected by this type of cancer. We are also establishing a road map for implementing new technologies successfully to fight other cancers. Only then will we be able to declare our country's "War on Cancer" a victory.